

Pizzeria Uno Integrates Business and Family Success

By Robert Williamson

Like many small business owners, John Stant's top priorities are his business and his family. The owner of Dover's Pizzeria Uno franchise has successfully balanced both priorities as one of the state's leading family-operated businesses.

After graduating high school and working as a salesman on Virginia's eastern shore, Stant returned to Dover in 1975. With his father-in-law, Raymond Stone, he purchased two candy wholesale businesses with \$17,000 in annual sales. By the time they sold S & S Candy Company nine years later, they had grown the company to just under \$1 million in gross revenue.

Stant and his wife Marian had been fascinated by the restaurant industry for a long time. In 1983, they started a Bonanza franchise with a U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) loan. After 10 years, they converted the Bonanza to Stone's Family Buffet, an all-you-can-eat buffet style restaurant. Marian, a master cake decorator, worked in the buffet's bake shop.

By 1999, John realized that the all-you-can-eat buffet concept was "worn out" in the Dover market. He recalled a restaurant convention he attended in Chicago where he visited the original Pizzeria Uno's. He quickly realized that Dover was missing a place to get "gourmet pizza in a casual theme setting." Although Uno's corporate officials were moving away from offering opportunities to single store franchisees, Stant sold them on the idea for the Dover market.

Stant already had the location for Uno's, but the building and equipment were nearly 20 years old. Extensive renovations were required to bring everything up to Uno's franchise standards. He returned to Mid-Atlantic Business Finance Company, an SBA certified development company through which he had financed the SBA loan in 1983. Thanks to a SBA 504 loan financed through Mid Atlantic and Artisans Bank, he was able to extend the payments over 20 years and invest more money in the business' operations due to the lower cash injection.

"Without the 504 program, I'm not sure we'd still be around," commented Stant.

The financing package allowed him to focus on the business' growth, rather than worrying about survival. Sales have steadily increased \$600,000 each year since he converted the buffet into the Pizzeria Uno's. He now employs approximately 70 people, including 15 full-time employees. The franchise's success is driven by a strong base of local customers and tourists passing through on their way to the beaches or to NASCAR events.

He attributes his business success to his late father-in-law, who worked as a research chemist for most of his career, but joined forces with Stant later in life to

become an entrepreneur. He is pleased with the progress of the business since launching the Pizzeria Uno's franchise, but is especially proud of his wife and children.

Among his employees are several of his 12 children, who range in age from 29 to four. Over the years they have learned every aspect of the family's restaurant business, including cooking, washing dishes, bussing and waiting tables. Johnny, who has been working at the family's restaurants since he was 14, is now general manager. Mary Beth, a waitress, is working on her doctorate in cellular and molecular biology at the University of Delaware. Timothy, who also has worked in the restaurants since he was 14, recently received his master's degree in teaching from Wesley College and is teaching at Thomas Moore Academy.

In addition to his economic contributions, Stant also gives back to the Dover community in other ways. Through a national program sponsored by Uno's, non-profit organizations receive a 20 percent discount on their bills when they host a meeting at Uno's. Over the past 18 months, John has reduced bills by \$40,000 to support volunteer fire companies, school groups, athletic teams, the Cancer Society, and other community groups. He is also a member of the Delaware State and Central Delaware Chambers of Commerce and serves on an educational committee at his alma mater, Holy Cross High School.

His next goal is to increase sales an additional \$500,000 to strengthen the business for the second generation of Stant entrepreneurs, but he quickly adds: "I'm only 50. I'm too young to think [about retirement]."

"Have we arrived? That's the \$64,000 question," Stant said. "You're only as good as your last meal."

Famous words from an entrepreneur who truly understands the restaurant industry. Stant's ongoing entrepreneurial success is a result of his flexibility to adjust to market trends and listen to customers' needs. And he is just getting started.

Robert Williamson is district counsel of the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Delaware District Office.